

Graduates find time for service

Sara Angle Catholic News Service | Jul. 8, 2011

WASHINGTON -- For many young graduates, the bleak job market coupled with the desire to help others is leading them to commit their time to service.

There are numerous groups that offer service programs for graduates, but organizations such as the St. Vincent Pallotti Center and Catholic Volunteer Network link Catholics with faith-based service opportunities.

"The thing that makes Catholic volunteer service unique is that you have the pillars for why we do what we do. It's based in the Gospel and Catholic social teaching," Mike Goggin director of the St. Vincent Pallotti Center in Washington, told CNS.

Rooted in community, simple living and prayer, faith-based service is "appealing for people who want to live a more authentic Christian life," he said.

The Pallotti Center's mission statement explains that its goal is to "share a vision of church which encourages collaboration, having laity, clergy and religious work together in the mission of the church."

"For me, faith and service have always been interrelated; my faith has always been really important to me," said volunteer Caitlin Baummer. Baummer is finishing her year of service with Catholic Charities Project SERVE in Baltimore, a position she received through Catholic Volunteer Network.

Catholic Volunteer Network and the Pallotti Center publish directories of volunteer opportunities and help people find a volunteer program that will match their skills and needs. They also follow up to ensure volunteers have positive experiences and to encourage personal and spiritual development.

Baummer's interest in service began in college, after she went on a service trip to West Virginia. "As much time as I got to spend doing service work in college, it just wasn't quite enough for me," she told CNS in a phone interview.

Baummer discerned she had a vocation for service, and decided to apply for only faith-based volunteer opportunities after college.

"I definitely wouldn't call it a year off," she said of her service year, "It's a very different kind of work ... it's a very thankless job. It can be rewarding, but that's not why I do it," she explained.

Goggin said the Pallotti Center has heard from volunteer programs that the number of applications has risen in recent years.

"It has to do with the economy," said Goggin. "There is a lack of opportunities for gainful employment elsewhere," so recent graduates are looking for places to build and use their skills.

Baummer said the state of the economy did not affect her decision to volunteer, but she feels "very fortunate to

have been born into a place of privilege," so that she was able to dedicate a year to service. "I feel that with such privilege comes a responsibility to share the resources and talents that God gave me with those who do not have the same opportunities."

Goggin also noted that "volunteer service will be a great resume builder. There will be skills people will learn that they wouldn't learn otherwise that are very marketable and transferable."

He explained that the center has seen an explosion of interest in short-term mission projects among college and high school students. "We try to help them process the experience when they get back," he said.

Young adults may be the biggest group coming to the Pallotti Center for assistance in the discernment process, but there also are volunteer trends among members of the baby-boom generation and families and couples who are looking to volunteer together.

Goggin cited the abundance of technology and today's fast pace as other reasons for the increase in volunteer interest. "As Americans, we tend to have a lot of stuff and sometimes we wonder if it would be simpler to get off the grid."

In a recent meeting with Catholic University of America students who had returned from a short-term mission trip, Goggin discovered that the students found their trip to be a good opportunity to de-clutter their lives.

For Catholics trying to find a new way to connect with the church, many Catholic volunteer programs introduce different models of prayer. "Prayer disciplines are best learned in a year away," said Goggin.

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